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ABSTRACT

This report focuses on the state-supported Undergraduate Writing Program at Illinois State University (ISU). Several innovations have contributed to the expansion and improvement of ISU's Undergraduate Writing Program, whose key components are: the Writing-across-the-Curriculum Program in the College of Arts and Sciences; the use of microcomputers to enhance freshman writing courses; and the Writing Placement Exam, tutorial-intensive sections of Language and Composition I, and the University Writing Exam. The objectives of the undergraduate writing course include improvement of the quality of undergraduate writing skills at ISU, working together with area high schools and community colleges in improving the learning and teaching of writing skills throughout Illinois, and the dissemination of model curricular strategies and materials, research findings, and methods of assessing writing skills. Evidence of program effectiveness includes the following: incorporating writing into the study of other disciplines makes students active participants in the learning process; the use of microcomputers improves the productivity, attendance, and punctuality of students; and the effects of implementing the Writing Placement Exam reach far beyond simply identifying those students who need improvement in writing and supplying them with intensive tutoring to an alteration of instructors' evaluation perspectives. (SM)

UNDERGRADUATE WRITING PROGRAM. ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

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AASCU/ERIC Model Programs Inventory Project

The AASCU/ERIC Model Programs Inventory is a two-year project seeking to establish and test a model system for collecting and disseminating information on model programs at AASCU-member institutions--375 of the public four-year colleges and universities in the United States.

The four objectives of the project are:

- To increase the information on model programs available to all institutions through the ERIC system
- To encourage the use of the ERIC system by AASCU institutions
- To improve AASCU's ability to know about, and share information on, activities at member institutions, and
- To test a model for collaboration with ERIC that other national organizations might adopt.

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UNDERGRADUATE WRITING PROGRAM

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

Several innovations have contributed to the expansion and improvement of Illinois State University's Undergraduate Writing Program. The key components of this carefully sequenced program include: (1) The Writing-across-the-Curriculum Program in the College of Arts and Sciences; (2) the Use of Microcomputers in Freshman Writing Courses; and (3) the Writing Placement Exam, Tutorial-Intensive Sections of Language and Composition I, and the University Writing Exam.

In 1985, Illinois State University's Department of English received $300,000 in new state resources to expand and improve its undergraduate writing program. The objectives of the undergraduate writing program are:

1. To improve the quality of undergraduate writing skills at Illinois State University.
2. To promote the concept that improving writing skills is the responsibility not only of English teachers, but of teachers in other departments as well.
3. To assess the teaching and learning of writing skills in the expanded undergraduate writing program so as to determine the extent to which the program is improving the writing skills of students.
4. To work together with area high schools and community colleges in improving the learning and teaching of writing skills throughout Illinois.
5. To disseminate throughout the state and nation model curricular strategies and materials, research findings of the effectiveness of various classroom approaches, and methods of assessing writing skills.

The elements of the program have been carefully integrated and, where appropriate, sequenced. These elements are:

1. Writing-across-the-Curriculum in the College of Arts and Sciences: When student writing skills that have been developed in English composition classes are not emphasized in other classes, these skills tend to atrophy. One reason for this retrogression of skills is that, without a comprehensive literate environment which encourages good writing habits, students do not feel compelled to take writing seriously. The College of Arts and Sciences responded to this problem by implementing, in a series of carefully planned phases, a comprehensive intracollegiate writing-across-the-curriculum program.

   Phase One (Summer 1985): Each of the fifteen departments in the College identified one of its course offerings that is included in ISU's University Studies program. During the summer of 1985, one professor from each department who teaches that department's designated course participated in a two-week seminar conducted by writing specialists from the Department of English. This seminar consisted of a brief overview of research into the relationship

between writing and learning, a discussion of writing assignments appropriate to the subject matter of each department, and an examination of strategies for evaluation that would make it easier for faculty to handle the time-consuming and problematic aspect of assigning writing in a course not expressly concerned with teaching writing. Faculty members attending the seminar were paid a $500 stipend.

Phase Two (1985-86 Academic Year to the Present): Since the fall semester 1985, faculty participants in the seminar have applied, in their University Studies courses, the approaches to assigning and evaluating writing developed in the seminar. Project directors from the Department of English consult with the faculty individually as well as train and help supervise teaching assistants assigned to the faculty. These teaching assistants, who provide help grading writing assignments and serve as tutors, consist of graduate assistants and undergraduate teaching assistants majoring in English as well as in other disciplines.

Phase Three (Summer 1986): English department chairpersons from fifteen area high schools and community colleges participated in a one-week seminar on the ISU campus. The purpose of the seminar was to acquaint the chairpersons with the nature of a cross-disciplinary writing program and to help them learn how to establish such a program at their home institutions. Participating teachers were given $500 stipends and academic credit for the seminar.

Phase Four (1986-87) Academic Year): The chairpersons who participated in the summer 1986 seminar began to implement writing-across-the-curriculum programs in the high schools and community colleges they represent, using the materials and methods developed at ISU. Throughout the year, teams of ISU faculty who participated in the College Writing-Across-the-Curriculum project consulted with lectures at these high schools and community colleges. Thus, secondary and post-secondary teachers from the same discipline discussed the most effective ways to incorporate writing into their classrooms. For example, high school biology teachers did not discuss pertinent writing assignments and evaluation with English teachers, but with University biology teachers.

Phase Five (1987-88 Academic Year): Because of the success of the College's Writing-Across-the-Curriculum project, it was used as a model for implementing writing-across-the-curriculum throughout the entire university. Professors from all ISU departments were paid $500 stipends to attend a seven-day seminar during the summer session. The began incorporating materials and methods developed in the seminar into their classes during the fall 1987 semester. During the summer 1987, project directors also began collecting and evaluating the materials used by high schools and community colleges. Three areas of evaluation were concentrated on: the quantity and quality of the writing assignments used across the disciplines in the schools, the teachers' perceptions of the effect of writing on the learning taking place in their courses, and the

reaction of students toward courses that use writing as a learning tool.

2. The Use of Microcomputers to Enhance Instruction in Introductory Writing Courses: Beginning in the fall 1986 semester, all freshman writing courses offered by the Department of English at ISU were converted to computer-assisted instruction. So that each student enrolled in Language and Composition I and II could be assigned a word processor and a printer for classroom use, 200 Zenith (Zenith (Z-148) microcomputers and Citizen 120D dot-matrix printers were installed in nine classrooms. An additional 200 computers and printers are available for homework and out-of-class assignments in the university library and dormitories. Word Star Professional, a word processing program, is also provided for student use.

   The decision to convert all writing courses to computer-assisted instruction was based on the success of a two-year pilot program conducted by the Department of English. Word processing capability enhances the instructional model favored by the Department. In this model, known as the process approach, teachers directly intervene in students' writing during the writing process in a manner similar to artists' studio classes. Students spend much of their class time revising their work or consulting with the teacher and fellow students about revisions of their own writing or the writing of other students. The findings of research into the process approach consistently stress the importance of viewing writing as rewriting. Word processing eliminates many of the hindrances involved in revising text and facilitates the addition, deletion, rearrangement, and speedy production of a text. Therefore, students and teachers can concentrate on developing students' abilities to perceive the need for revisions and to plan and execute those revisions.

   Before each fall semester begins, new faculty assigned to these classes are provided with a week-long orientation on computer-assisted instruction and on the process approach to writing. During the school year, two members of the English faculty with expertise in computer-assisted instruction are regularly available in the classroom area for on-the-spot consultation, as is a full-time computer maintenance person.

   Because Language and Composition I is the only course required of every student in the University and because it is a course typically taken early in the student's program, it represents a powerful medium for conveying computer skills to a large proportion of the student body. Approximately 5,000 students enroll in the English department's computer-assisted writing courses annually.

3. The Placement Exam, Tutorial-Intensive Writing Courses, and the University Writing Exam: All students entering ISU are required to write a placement essay, which is holistically graded by trained raters. Using a formula developed by the department, students' essay ratings are combined with their ACT English subscore to predict their changes of passing Language and Composition I. Students with less than a fifty-fifty chance of passing are assigned

to specially designed tutorial-intensive sections of the course. Unlike remedial courses, grading standards in these courses are identical to regular sections. Course instructors are assigned two Undergraduate Teaching Assistants trained in personalized writing instruction so that tutorial assistance may be integrated into the course. Weekly contact hours have been increased from three to five, and a conference-centered, rhetorically-oriented approach to the goals of the standard course has been adopted. Despite early predictions, students in the intensive course improve at a greater rate than students in the regular course.

During the fall 1983 semester, the University Writing Exam took its place among the sequence of programs and courses designed to improve undergraduate writing. To graduate, students must take and pass this exam during their junior year. Not only does the exam prevent the graduation of students whose writing skills fall below a level generally expected of college graduates, but the exam's existence motivates students to elect writing-intensive classes. For example, since the implementation of the exam, enrollment in upper division writing courses offered by the Department of English has increased by fifty percent. The exam also provides an excellent method for helping to assess the relative success of ISU's expanded undergraduate writing program. Student performance on the University Writing Exam may be compared with their performance on the Placement Exam essays written three years earlier. Analyses of individual aspects of student writing (e.g., syntax, organization, usage levels, sense of purpose, and audience) may be compared to assess the specific areas of improvement or lack of improvement in student writing over the three-year period. Knowledge gained from the analysis of individual aspects of student writing may then be used to revise curricula, teaching methods, and materials.

EVIDENCE OF PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS

Writing-Across-the-Curriculum

Incorporating writing into the study of other disciplines makes students active participants in the learning process. They must think about their subject matter, analyzing and synthesizing it, before they can commit thoughts regarding that subject matter to paper. In a pilot program which moved writing-across-the-curriculum into an economics classroom, students may or may not have improved their writing skills, but they did learn economics better. Illinois State's writing-across-the-curriculum program in the College of Arts and Sciences has been perceived by College faculty and the Dean as being so effective that the Deans of other colleges have requested that they be allowed to participate in writing-across-the-curriculum projects in their own colleges.

Use of Microcomputers in Freshman Writing Courses

The use of microcomputers has been found to improve the productivity, attendance, and punctuality of students. It also revitalized instructors who had begun to "burn out" after years of teaching English 101. Students attest that they are writing better because they are getting

more hands-on writing and rewriting experience and less lecturing. Students are learning from their mistakes and from the feedback they receive from their instructor and classmates. Furthermore, they are learning about computers and developing keyboarding skills in addition to writing skills. Whereas editing on a typewriter can be a tedious task, editing on the computer is fast and easy, allowing students to experiment with different phrasings. The microcomputers has improved conditions so much that students often arrive at class early, stay late, and are rarely absent. It is not uncommon for students to take their floppy disks to the university library where they line up to use the 70 terminals available there.

Writing Placement Exam/Tutorial-Intensive Sections/University Writing Exam

The effects of implementing the Writing Placement Exam have reached far beyond simply identifying those students who need improvement in writing and supplying them with intensive writing tutoring. With the lower one-seventh of the students removed from the mainstream writing course, the University had expected the class grade point average to rise. On the contrary, the class grade point average has decreased slightly. the English department hypothesizes that removing the slower students has altered instructors' evaluation perspectives, shifting their expectations slightly upward. Needless to say, this apparent increase in rigor is welcomed. In addition, participation by advanced students in the Honors Writing Option has relieved some of the enrollment pressure in composition courses by diverting the best students into literature courses.

The University Writing Exam is failed by approximately 10 percent of those attempting it. These students must now provide evidence of adequate writing skills before being allowed to graduate. As a result, enrollment in advanced composition courses has increased by approximately 50 percent since implementation of the University Writing Exam.